Glass Ceilings and Ground Floors for Women in *Dracula*

Equality for women has always been a heated debate in the United States: in Roe vs. Wade women were allowed full rights of their own body, in 1920 women were granted the right to vote, and the early 1800s women were allowed to own (but not control) property in their own name. Victorian England circa 1837-1901, women’s roles in society were evolving from what they once were. New ideals were being brought forth that many men though women should exemplify and such ideas were expressed in popular literature of the era. Throughout Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, the women in the novel serve not only as a feminine and soft touch to a dark and horror-filled work, but also allow the reader to explore the roles of women in an era best known for having a social glass ceiling. Women were barred from advancing “too far” in society and, instead, were expected to know their place as being inferior to men. The book is very biased in regards to women and presents the reader with images of women that are considered non-Victorian and evil, versus one that is virtuous and Victorian. These subsets concerning women were shown through the heightened sexual scenes regarding chapters with non-virtous “outsiders”, the constant underlying struggle for dominating male control, and by supplying the reader a single example of ideal Victorian womanhood in the character of Mina.

The female vampires, though they are gorgeous and able to woo men, are considered corrupted and dirty due to their sexual nature, coupled with their lack of Englishness. Jonathan’s encounter with these three women at Dracula’s castle show how they used their beauty to trance unknowing men into submission, a threat against Victorianism. Their sexuality allowed them temporary dominance over humans. This is again seen briefly when Dr. Van Helsing ventures into their sleeping area in Transylvania and notes that he was quite taken for a bit with their looks. Luckily, he was not fazed like younger men, and was able to kill them. Stevenson noted that this threat is extra terrifying because it was “foreign to typical experience” (Stevenson 136) during that era, and because it represented a “distorted mirror of human behavior” (Stevenson 142). The nationalities of these women are unknonwn, but it is easily determined that the behaviors they exhibit would never be seen by true English women. Even innocent, sweet Lucy is considered corrupted once she turns into a vampire, blurring the line between what makes one English and what makes one an outsider. Despite looking like her normal living self after awakening from the dead, she appears to be tainted, an idea that is symbolized through the blood “stained purity of her lawn death-robe” (Stoker 250). During her murder-exorcism of the vampire within, her death is heightened with sexual terminology getting as graphic as saying “[her] body shook and quivered and twisted in wild contortions” (Stoker 256). This is as almost described as a female orgasm, suggesting that the “release” is the thing to save Lucy.

While the non-victorian woman are sexualized as high-end mistresses or prostitutes, the Victorian women lack sexuality, even in the most compromising of situations. Dracula’s baptism of Mina with his own blood is very important to the story in regards to the lack of sexuality shown by the Victorian woman. Mina is physically forced to submit to Dracula after he enters her room. For Mina, in this scene, it is described that “for a few seconds she lay in her helpless attitude and disarray” (Stoker 333) following the fleeing of her attacker, and then Dr. Van Helsing “drew the coverlet gently over the body” (Stoker 334). The language used to describe this passage is transferred as a description of a rape scene. Mina’s emotional “rape” shows the helplessness of not just her as a woman but of all women. Later it is discovered that, even though bodily fluids were exchanged forcefully, due to Mina’s virtue and submission to the men protecting her, she overcomes the vampirism and is indeed incorruptible. Following Dracula’s first known attacks Dr. Van Helsing and Dr. Seward fought for Lucy’s life against Dracula who was trying to drain it. Despite being portrayed and a silly and stupid girl, like Mina, she lacked sexuality while she upheld Victorian ideals. Once she was forced to follow Dracula’s desires, she was literally drained of her blood and innocence to the point of death. Following her vampire awakening, she becomes sexualized.

There was a constant struggle for power between the men of the novel concerning who controlled the women, and who the women should be able to control. The female vampires stayed with Dracula for centuries and chose not the leave him. Instead, when Dracula determined it was the right time, he left them in Transylvania while he traveled to England. After Dracula left Transylvania the women stayed in the area and did not leave, not because they were forced to by Dracula, but they chose to stay for the easy supply of food and a safe home. These women showed that they were still submissive to Dracula and unable to be productive without his direct instruction. Meanwhile during Jonathan’s visit to the castle, these women had power over him through their hypnotizing beauty and sexualized nature. Each female vampire’s presence threatens the male dominance through the fear that the women can now penetrate men (with their sharp teeth) instead of men being able to just penetrate them; a threat to not only the Victorian role of women, but also of the roles of Victorian men. Despite having temporary control over Jonathan, they were still under Dracula’s command who forbade them to touch what was his. In turn each female vampire is killed by a man proving that in the end men always had the power over them, and because they tried to push past the glass ceiling they instead were kicked back down to the social ground floor (among beggars, prostitutes, and dishonorable servants) where they were thought to belong.

In England, Lucy planned to give her father’s power over her to another man through marriage well before Dracula’s attack against her. After her first attack, Lucy came to Dracula’s call whenever he desired. This was made most apparent to the reader, and much later to Mina, when she found that Lucy had “slept-walked” all the way to the harbor. Lucy unwillingly moves from the control of her father to the control of Dracula. If she had been married and was able to live the life of a Victorian housewife, Lucy would eventually have earned the power to run her household and to bring up her children, something only granted as a reward for marriage. Ironically after becoming a vampire, Lucy only ever had control over the children she kidnapped; yet horrifically, Lucy penetrates them by sucking their blood, breaking the motherly control that a relationship between a woman and child should have. Like the other female vampires, she too is killed by the hands of men.

Men were always trying to dominate Mina. After the discovery of Dracula’s true intentions, the men determine that it is too unsafe for her to continue on this adventure, and they attempt to protect her from it despite her initial protests. Then after succumbing to their wishes, the men actually leave her unprotected, directly leading to Dracula’s attacks. By drinking her blood and then by making her drink his, not only is she forced to come to his call, but it sealed her fate that she too would become a vampire. Mina realized that this meant that she too was defiled like her dear deceased Lucy, since Mina immediately started screaming “unclean, unclean” (Stoker 332) after leaving a blood stain on Jonathan’s white bed shirt. Once it was realized Mina had been attacked, all the men fought to control her again. Even Renfield, who never had control of Mina to begin with, attempted to protect her from Dracula which directly caused his demise. In the final battle, Quincey sacrificed his life for Mina to ensure her purity and to rid of Dracula’s control over her. Throughout this time, Mina was portrayed as helpless over this power exchange and never is considered dominant over a male. Mina is utterly subservient to the men controlling her, despite having thoughts suggesting she does not agree with their actions or reasons because “though it was a bitter pill for [her] to swallow, [she] could say nothing, save to accept their chivalrous care of [her]”(Stoker 287). At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Mina has a son who she controls now, but eventually, once grown up it is assumed he will control her.

The Victorian woman is conservative, but soft and innocent in appearance. They meet social customs of trends, but nothing risqué or scandalous based on their social status. They are educated, knowledgable, and useful, but not independent. There women use their skills to better their husband’s lives and household. The female vampires represent everything that is not ideal in a Victorian woman.These women are voluptuous, are not dressed like respectable women, and are the ones penetrating men with their teeth. They are sexual beings comparable to prostitutes. The animalistic nature of the women represent the Victorian fear of women acting without male approval and attempting to break through the glass ceiling. In Jonathan’s encounter with the three female vampires in Dracula’s castle, he notes that the blonde one “licked her lips like an animal” (Stoker 49), a hint that by not being a lady then her nature can only be compared to that of an undomesticated animal. Lucy, before she is transformed into a vampire, makes fun of the new women of the era, saying that they would be surprised with how much she and Mina ate that day; Lucy ironically turns into a representation of that woman whose hunger is not satisfied unless she feeds on small children—an act that goes against the Victorian ideals of motherhood. After she has been transformed and Van Helsing, Arthur, and Dr. Seward visit her “grave” to kill her, the men witness her throw a child down upon whom she intends to feed, signifying her total loss of Victorian womanhood.

Mina is the one woman figure throughout the novel that is consistent in theVictorian ideals, and she stands for everything a woman in this era was expected to be. Even the men subconsciously agree with this as they all end up loving Mina in some fashion, and are willing to sacrifice their lives in order to save her from Dracula. She becomes the symbol of saving Victorian Womanhood for all of England. Mina is resourceful, useful, conservative, and yet sensitive. She has no sexual qualities and is best described as maternal and womanly. She makes connections with each of the men at some point admitting that “women have something of the mother in [them] that makes [them] rise above smaller matters when the mother-spirit is invoked” (Stoker 272). She is refined and treats all the men she encounters with equal kindness. She does take on duties not typical for a women of the time, such as typing, shorthand, and warfare, but only to help her husband in his times of need. She is able to function outside of the domestic world, but willingly does not venture far from it.

There are many ideas in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* that go against the societal norms of the Victorian Era. Despite all the changes each group encounters through their experiences with vampires, the one woman who triumphs by maintaining her virtuous Victorian lifestyle is Mina. The female vampires who threatened to take control over men through their sexuality were quickly killed because of the vulnerability their un-virtuous lives created. Stoker gave an example of attempted loss of Victorian womanhood when Mina was forced to drink Dracula’s blood however Dracula’s death allowed her and England to become as pure as they were before his arrival; “the snow is not more stainless” (Stoker 433).